

## **Labor History in the Public School Curriculum**

### **Testimony for the Labor Committee**

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From Jeremy Brecher, Connecticut historian and former Humanities Scholar-in-Residence at Connecticut Public Television and Radio.

I speak as a Connecticut historian, the author of two books on Connecticut labor history, and the former Humanities Scholar-in-Residence at Connecticut Public Television and Radio, where I was scriptwriter for more than twenty documentary TV shows on Connecticut life and history.

The proposed legislation mandates the teaching of labor history, the collective bargaining process, and the history of existing workplace protections. That will provide both an understanding of critical human and social rights in the workplace and of the democratic process by which they were instituted. It will fill an important gap in the education of our young people and their preparation for the world of work.

That gap is illustrated by the experience of a student at the university of Connecticut who heard mention in class of a general strike in the Naugatuck Valley in 1920 that labor historians today regard as one of the most significant events in Connecticut's 200 years of labor history. He decided he would like to know more about it. He later described the results:

"I live in the city that this incident occurred in and yet had never heard about it. Upon looking into the matter I found that there was nothing said in *any* of the books concerning Waterbury's history (approximately 15 books included this period of time.)"

He had never heard of it, although he had gone to school in that city for much of his young life! That is part of what has been called the "iron curtain" that separates Americans from knowledge about the history of work and working people. Indeed, while the history of business is almost always taught in the school curriculum, the history of labor is usually blacked out.

How would we feel if this were true of the history of African Americans? Of women? Of immigrants?

How do we expect young people to relate intelligently to the world of work without some knowledge of how workers have organized themselves in the past?

How do we expect them to grapple intelligently with the problems of today's changing and extremely challenging workplace without an understanding of how relations in the workplace have changed in the past and how past challenges have been met?

How do we expect them to be informed participants in the setting and enforcement of rules governing the workplace if they know nothing about the rationale for such rules and how they have developed?

How do we expect them to be anything but passive victims in the face of a rapidly changing economy and society unless they have some understanding of how people have used collective action to address such challenges in the past?

It is often said that education is a necessary condition for democracy. An understanding of labor history is an essential part of what our young people need to be able to participate effectively in our democracy.

Labor history is nothing new in Connecticut schools. I have consulted with teachers in a variety of settings who have included labor history units in their curriculum with great success. The city of Danbury has been the site of a nationally recognized effort to teach labor history at various levels. These efforts often make history vivid and meaningful by including dramatic local events and encouraging students to conduct their own oral history interviews with family and community members.

I urge you to support the inclusion of labor history in the Connecticut public school curriculum.